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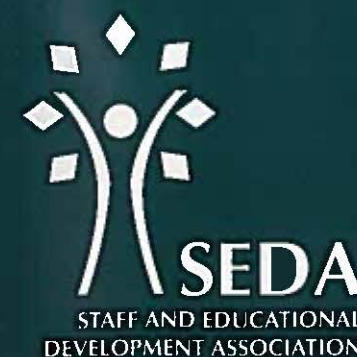
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# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

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### SEDA

Woburn House,  
20 - 24 Tavistock Square  
London WC1H 9HF  
Tel 020 7380 6767  
Fax 020 7387 2655  
Email [office@seda.ac.uk](mailto:office@seda.ac.uk)

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## New academics' experiences of induction to teaching: An Activity Theory approach

**Susan Mathieson, Linda Allin, Roger Penlington, Kate Black, Libby Orme, Emma Anderson, Helen Hooper and Lynn McInnes, Northumbria University**

*This article reports on a project that was supported by a SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grant, 2018.*

In this article we present findings of a research project investigating the experiences of new academics in the process of becoming effective teachers, using an Activity Theory framework (Engeström, 2001). The research was undertaken in a post-92 university that has shifted from teaching and professional development to prioritise a new emphasis on research. However, all academics have a dual responsibility for teaching and research. The project brought us together as education developers who were involved in the induction of academics into teaching across six departments. We shared a common aim in trying to understand the issues faced by new academics in their various disciplines and departments, in order to improve their induction experience and provide an enhanced CPD offer.

Activity Theory focuses on socially situated learning through engaging in everyday tasks – in this case how academics learn to teach in disciplines and departments. This offers an alternative perspective to individualised, performative, market-driven measures that are increasingly being used to judge academic teaching practices. Instead, Activity Theory views academics as learners within complex activity systems comprising six elements, which we defined for the induction of academics into teaching, as follows:

- *The Subject*: academics new to departments
- *The Object*: induction into teaching
- *The Community*: who and how they support learning about teaching
- *Tools and resources*: that support induction into teaching
- *Rules*: governing induction to teaching
- *Division of labour*: for new academics.

Activity Theory has been used as a tool for the professional development of teaching in higher education through engaging academics in reflection on contradictions as a way of stimulating changing thinking and practices (Englund and Price, 2018). The use of this framework for the current research thus served two purposes: as a research tool, and as a tool for staff development for the academics involved in the project. Activity Theory has the potential for promoting 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2001) through engaging participants in reflection on the contradictions within the activity systems for induction to teaching, in disciplines and departments, and across the University more widely.



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In developing the research project, we first engaged in collaborative mapping of the Activity System for the induction of academics into teaching as in Figure 1, then each education developer wrote a vignette of the activity system for induction to teaching in their department. These vignettes were analysed using the six elements of Activity Theory, with a focus on key issues and contradictions.

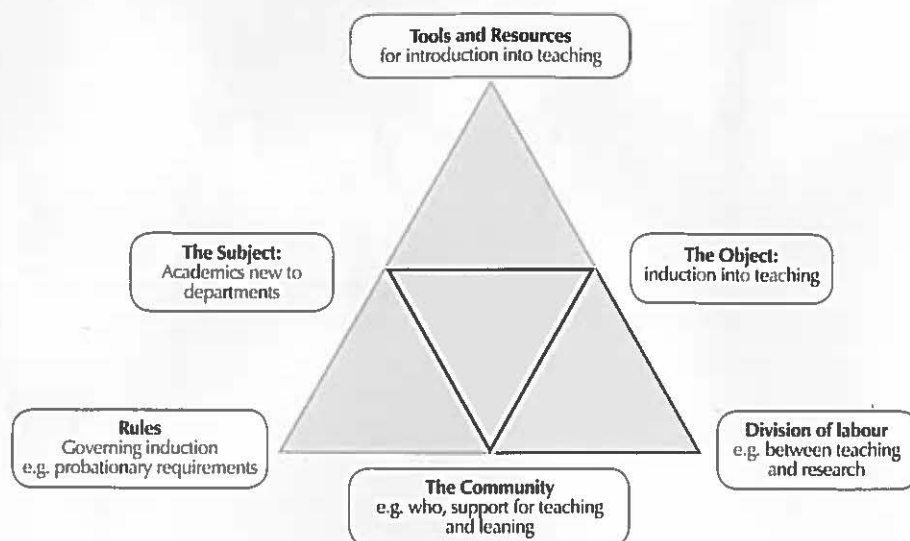


Figure 1 Activity System for induction into teaching in disciplines and departments

Semi-structured interviews were then undertaken with two new academics who were on probation in each department. The interview protocol was developed collaboratively, using the categories we identified for the Activity System for induction to teaching in disciplines and departments. The focus of the data analysis was on surfacing key issues and contradictions within the Activity System. These are captured in Table 1, below.

Aspect of Activity System
<b>Subject: academics who are new to teaching at the institution</b>
Many newly appointed academics had just completed a PhD, or came from industry, and were new to teaching at university. Several were international staff who had little experience of being a teacher or learner in UK HE.
There was a lack of confidence in adapting teaching to new contexts, with academics falling back on 'telling' rather than facilitating active learning.
New academics often experienced a culture shock at differences from their previous experiences: in student behaviour, and approaches to teaching.
Academics experienced conflicting identities around what it means to be an academic, in particular balancing teaching with research.
Many felt a sense of threatened wellbeing and uncertainty when faced with conflicting and unsupported demands, and work overload.
A personal commitment to succeeding as a teacher in HE was important in whether academics 'sank or swam'.
<b>Object: support for induction to teaching</b>
Academics experienced a lack of formal induction to their teaching role.
There was uneven support from line managers, often overloading work for new appointments.
Academics valued the support of programme and module leaders in their induction to teaching, and assigned Learning and Teaching Mentors, where this was offered.
The most important induction to teaching was often through informal support by academic colleagues teaching on the same programmes, often through room shares.



New academics did not feel able to keep asking colleagues who they perceived were overloaded, and were often unclear who to ask for help with teaching.
Support from non-academic staff was valued, e.g. admin staff and Technology Enhanced Learning teams.
Teaching often started before support for teaching had been put in place, and new academics were often left to 'sink or swim'.
The PGCert in HE was valued for creating spaces for critical reflection on practice, and widening the circle of allies for sharing of teaching experiences across the university. However, it rarely provided support for immediate classroom challenges.
<i>Community: who is the community for induction to teaching, and how do they support induction</i>
Programme and module teams were significant communities for induction to teaching, depending on the frequency and quality of team meetings.
Informal groupings, often linked to room shares, were significant communities for induction to teaching.
There were few clear discipline communities supporting teaching and learning.
Learning to teach often happened by observing and 'modelling' in programme and module teams, including, for example, team teaching, shadowing, using module sites on the electronic learning platform, and practising with existing teaching resources.
Departmental and discipline communities were generally less effective in facilitating deep reflection on pedagogical challenges; they tended to show how to manage immediate problems.
Teaching colleagues were often perceived to be too busy to provide support with teaching, and new staff found themselves having to share the burden of heavy teaching loads with colleagues.
There was often a mismatch between new academics' expectations of students and of how to teach, and characterisations by disciplinary colleagues of how to engage students in learning.
There was often a mismatch between how programme teams talked about students, and the reality of relations between academics and students in the classroom, with colleagues glossing over challenges in classroom management.
There was a contradiction between what discipline communities were wanting to do for students, and the realities of what there was time for. Teaching practices of discipline groups were often driven by workload pressures, rather than by pedagogy.
<i>Tools and resources for induction to teaching</i>
Informal learning from role modelling was valued, e.g. online module resources, Peer Observation of classes, also team teaching a module from beginning to end before teaching on own.
Formal departmental practices such as Peer Observation of Teaching and formal HEA mentors were valued, especially when they provided opportunities to model or reflect on good teaching.
Opportunities for learning by observing were not made explicit; new academics sometimes had to create these opportunities for learning.
Policies and expectations were typically communicated via emails rather than a conversation.
The PGCert in HE facilitated the transition from lecturer transmission to facilitator of learning, and created opportunities to share experiences with colleagues across the university. However, it was less helpful in addressing day to day issues in teaching as they arose.
Where accessed, central CPD to support teaching and professional recognition was valued, but it tended to be insufficient and poorly signposted.
There was a tension between Technology Enhanced Learning expectations and support, and the realities of the reliability of Technology Enhanced Learning resources.
<i>Rules for induction of new academics to teaching</i>
There was a lack of transparency, and variability in rules around expectations of academics on probation and their teaching workloads.
Academics were expected to take on challenging demands appropriate to an experienced academic from day one.
Academics valued a long lead-in time to teaching to enable settling in to teaching and developing confidence in their role.
Often a contradiction between espoused rules governing teaching, and rules in practice, with academics finding it difficult to know where to access the most recent rules governing teaching.
<i>Division of labour</i>
New academics often overloaded with roles without being prepared, from first day of starting, e.g. programme and module leadership.
40:40:20 division of labour often in contradiction with realities of teaching demands, and opaque, with lack of coordination of workload across areas of work.
Contradiction between expectations of new academics prior to starting that they would focus on research, and the realities of teaching workloads.
Little recognition of discipline expertise in allocation of teaching.
Lecturers became de-professionalised in some cases by being given teaching materials prepared by 'experts' for lecturers to 'deliver'.

Table 1 Key issues and contradictions identified through the interviews with academics



## Summary of academic experiences of the key issues and contradictions in the process of becoming effective teachers

Most new academics experienced their induction to teaching as a process of 'sink or swim', with many being given challenging roles such as module or programme leader in their first semester, with minimal support. This was often experienced as threatening their developing identities and wellbeing. However, in some disciplines and departments new academics were given a breathing space before taking sole responsibility for teaching, with opportunities for team teaching and shadowing. This approach provided access to groups of academics, often through room shares, whom they could ask for advice about issues that surfaced on a just-in-time basis. Where this occurred, it enabled academics to develop a greater sense of self-efficacy.

The most significant elements identified by academics of their induction to teaching was the relative ineffectiveness of formal learning processes alone, and the importance of informal learning from colleagues, such as module teaching teams, office mates or programme leaders. Learning and Teaching Mentors often played a bridging role between formal and informal learning, which was valued by new academics. Where new academics had access to rich informal learning opportunities in programme and module teams, it enabled them to articulate their expertise and previous experiences in the discipline, such as areas of research or industry expertise, and they were supported to translate this into rewarding teaching experiences. However, others found themselves teaching topics they had little expertise in, and in some cases fell back on transmission of content, and experienced difficulties in managing student behaviour. Opportunities for informal learning were also circumscribed by the time pressures that academics were under, a reluctance from new academics to ask for support from overloaded colleagues, and the heavy workload demands they faced in the first semester. Many new academics experienced a sense of dissonance between the way they wanted to teach and the realities of how they were expected to teach within the time available. This was often articulated as a critique of teaching practices and expectations of students in their new discipline.

A key issue for new academics was that the rules governing the quality and quantity of work that new academics could be expected to undertake during probation were experienced as opaque, as were expectations of how they were to divide their time between teaching and research. Most new academics spent far longer on teaching, preparation and marking than they had been allocated as a workload, and experienced a sense of dissonance between their understanding that they were appointed to focus on research, and the realities of managing challenging teaching loads.

New academics experienced varying degrees of stress and work overload, which had impacted on their wellbeing, while incidents of loss of control of student learning had in some cases damaged their self-confidence. However, the majority had not only survived, but had a sense of having developed and grown as an academic during their probationary period, and of having passed from novice to experienced teacher.

The level of commitment of new academics to succeed in teaching was found to be very high, as was their self-efficacy in coping with challenges, and bouncing back despite these weaknesses in the induction process and activity systems supporting teaching. This suggests that successful induction may have less to do with the objective support provided to academics, than what Bernstein (2000) refers to as an 'inner dedication' of academics to knowledge and learning in the discipline. However, this came at a cost to new academics in terms of levels of stress and anxiety, and the sacrificing of life beyond work.

## Key recommendations for improving academics' experience of induction to teaching

Through discussion of the issues and contradictions that had been identified in the Activity System for the induction to teaching across our disciplines, the research group proposed the following recommendations:

- 1) Recognise the key role of informal learning in disciplines and departments and work to create more explicit opportunities to promote informal learning, including:
  - a) Buddy system for new academics
  - b) Room shares where possible, including both experienced and new academics. Construct these support groups where they don't exist
  - c) Make opportunities for shadowing more explicit
  - d) Team teaching should be encouraged for all academics who are new to teaching prior to taking a module independently
- 2) Team teaching and shadowing of all aspects of a module should be integrated into induction as part of the formal workload for all new academics for the first semester, and individual teaching responsibilities in the first semester should be kept to a minimum
- 3) Recognise that new academics do not want to bother busy colleagues, and provide explicit access to a dedicated team of experienced colleagues to support them with leading a module, assessments, electronic learning portal, personal tutoring expectations, etc.
- 4) Be aware of the contradictions within the community in how it negotiates teaching and supporting learning, and the messages about teaching that the community is giving:
  - a) Consider how to support new academics manage the hidden curriculum – e.g. managing disruptive behaviour, managing conflicts in workloads
- 5) Develop clear protocols and rules around expectations of what new academics can be asked to do, and their workloads, and make these available to new academics and to line managers
- 6) Develop an induction protocol specifically for teaching, in collaboration with new academics, including how to lead modules, assessments, using the electronic learning portal, personal tutoring, video recorded lectures, understanding policies supporting teaching, etc.

## Reflections on the value of Activity Theory as a tool for changing teaching practices

The research has deepened our collective understanding of the experience of academics of their induction into teaching,



and the contradictions they face in engaging with teaching.

However, we identified limitations in our capacity to use Activity Theory as a tool for changing induction practices, because while we have some agency to implement changes in our disciplines and departments, many of the factors impacting on academics' experience of induction lay beyond departments, in institutional policies and practices, and even beyond in national policy and changes in higher education globally. The value of Activity Theory as a tool for change agency is thus limited by the power of the people involved in the process to effect change.

While previous uses of Activity Theory as a tool for change agency (Englund and Price, 2018) have focused on knowledgeability surfaced through discussions between participants, in this research the main data source was in-depth semi-structured interviews with new academics. This research approach surfaced a range of issues that were surprising to the group of education developers engaged in the research project. As a research team we were struck by how much the academics interviewed were committed to their teaching and wanted to be successful teachers. Our perception prior to the research was that because the institution appeared to value research more than teaching, new academics would also value research over teaching. We were also struck by the levels of anxiety and tension experienced by new academics, and the pressures they were under. One outcome of the project is that as educational developers we have developed a greater degree of empathy for the experience of academics who are new to teaching, and a deeper understanding of their subjective experiences of induction.

Our reflections on the research led to valuable discussions about the tensions between the induction we would like new academics to receive, and what the time available to us allows. It enabled us to recognise that investing time in new academics is essential for the effectiveness of discipline-teaching communities. However, we recognised that we

need to engage more of our colleagues in understanding and empathising with the challenges faced by new academics, and find ways of mobilising them to offer the support new academics need. As Boud and Brew (2013) argue, the benefits of supporting the development of teaching are not just for the individual development of teachers, but are also essential for the health of the practice communities, or activity systems, that support teaching.

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- Susan Mathieson** (susan.mathieson@northumbria.ac.uk) is a Principal Lecturer (Director of Learning and Teaching) in Quality and Teaching Excellence, **Linda Allin** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, **Roger Penlington** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Mechanical and Construction Engineering, **Kate Black** is an Associate Professor in the Newcastle Business School, **Libby Orme** is a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology Department, **Emma Anderson** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences, **Helen Hooper** is a Principal Lecturer and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Applied Sciences, and **Lynn McInnes** is a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology Department, all at Northumbria University.

# The magic carpet of scholarship – An academic-led staff development project to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning

**Peter R. Draper, Graham Scott and Emma Peasland, University of Hull**

## Introduction

This article describes the development and evaluation of an academic-led staff development initiative for staff employed on teaching and scholarship contracts from two faculties at the University of Hull. The project objectives were to:

- 1) Introduce colleagues to a practical, theoretically-based model of the scholarship of learning and teaching (SoTL)
- 2) Use the model as a framework for team-based, interdisciplinary SoTL projects producing tangible scholarly outputs
- 3) Foster interdisciplinary communities of scholars committed to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching through peer review and the dissemination of good practice.

The project emerged from an earlier, unfunded initiative in the Faculty of Health Sciences, which helped staff to develop projects for dissemination at the university's annual teaching and learning conference. A small grant from SEDA enabled us to develop the project, extending it to two faculties (Health Sciences, and Science and Engineering) and to undertake a formal evaluation.